

# Vocabulary in Context

## Defining the Strategy

To build vocabulary, students must learn to use information from surrounding text or context to figure out the meaning of an unknown word. Authors build a variety of clues into their text to help readers decode and/or define difficult words. These context clues include:

- Concrete examples
- Contrast clues
- Description clues
- Definitions or synonyms
- Words or phrases that modify
- Conjunctions showing relationships

Since it is often not practical to use a dictionary while reading, this is a skill good readers employ automatically as they encounter unfamiliar words within passages. Vocabulary in context strategies allow students to use clues to improve their comprehension and add new vocabulary to their writing and conversation.

## Teaching the Strategy

### Objectives

- Students will utilize various clues within text to decode and/or define unknown vocabulary encountered within reading passages.
- Students will use meanings derived from context of reading passages to improve their comprehension of the text.

### Timeframe

15-25 minutes  
for each  
context clue

### Materials

- Three reading passages of your choice (one copy of each per student)
- Three overheads featuring each of the selected reading passages
- Overhead projector
- Marker for overheads

### Activity

1. Select a context clue for student practice.

## Strategic Reading in the Content Areas – Boosting Achievement in Grades 7-12

### Teaching the Strategy continued

2. Create or locate three short reading passages that are strong examples of the selected clue. You'll use the three passages for modeling, guided practice, and independent practice.

#### **Modeling—Passage #1**

3. Place the first passage on an overhead projector.
4. Read the passage and circle the unknown word or term. Then underline the words that provide clues related to the context clue you are teaching.
5. Discuss with students what these clues reveal about the unfamiliar word. Demonstrate how you would come up with the definition or meaning of this word or phrase.

#### **Guided Practice—Passage #2**

6. Provide each student with a copy of the second passage.
7. Identify the unknown word you want students to define.
8. Ask students to identify verbally the phrases or surrounding text that provide clues to the meaning of this unknown word. Have students underline these phrases on their copies of the passage as you underline them on the overhead.
9. Ask students to make predictions about the meaning of the new word based on the clues they've discovered in the text. Affirm correct responses.

#### **Independent Practice—Passage #3**

10. Provide each student with a copy of the third passage.
11. Identify the unknown word you want students to define.
12. Ask students to work independently to identify context clues and predict the meaning of the new word. Direct students to underline phrases or terms that provide clues to the definition. Check verbally for accuracy and to provide feedback for corrections.

#### **Additional Suggestions**

13. Repeat this instructional process for each type of context clue.

### Teaching the Strategy continued

14. Provide students with descriptions and examples of each context clue. Have students keep this information in notebooks for future reference and homework assignments.
15. Post descriptions and examples of context clues in the classroom for easy student reference.

### Skills Correlations

#### Essential Skills Survey

- Know how to decipher unfamiliar words using such strategies as context clues, word structure analysis, letter-sound relationships, and word histories. (e9)
- Identify, collect and/or select pertinent information while reading. (e5)
- Discriminate important ideas from unimportant ideas while reading. (e15)
- Apply, extend, and expand on information while reading. (e46)

#### NWEA

- New vocabulary
- Locating information
- Reading for detail
- Prediction

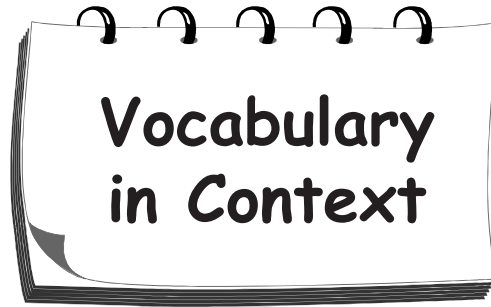
### Connecting the Strategy



Have students identify new vocabulary needed for tests in your content area. For example, direct students to use context clue strategies to define vocabulary from a section or chapter of their textbook. Ask students to work with partners to determine the meanings for new terms.

#### SOURCE

Burke, Jim. *Reader's Handbook: A Student Guide for Reading and Learning*.  
Wilmington, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.



## Concrete Examples

### ✦ Learning the Strategy

When you read, finding meanings for words you don't know is kind of like being a detective. Writers put clues to the meaning of words right in the text. If you know how to find context clues, you can figure out what new words mean. This means you won't always need a dictionary when you come across words you don't yet know.

Sometimes writers give examples that clarify or illustrate difficult concepts to give you the meaning of a new word. Writers use signal words (*such as, including, for instance, to illustrate, are examples of, for example*) to let the reader know that an example will follow.

### ☀ Practicing the Strategy

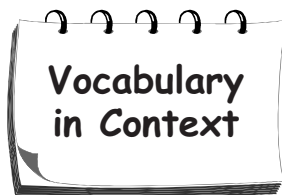
1. Review the context clue strategy before reading the passage.
2. Identify the unknown word you'll try to define from the passage.
3. Read the passage silently looking for any clues that could help define the word.
4. Make predictions about the meaning of the new word. Be prepared to explain how you used context clues to determine the meaning.

Scientists, such as paleontologists, have developed several techniques to study life from the prehistoric ages. These techniques allow them to study fossilized remains of plants, insects, extinct reptiles, and dinosaurs.

**Unknown Word:** paleontologist

**Phrase:**

**Meaning:**



## Contrast Clues

### ✚ Learning the Strategy

When you read, finding meanings for words you don't know is kind of like being a detective. Writers put clues to the meaning of words right in the text. If you know how to find context clues, you can figure out what new words mean. This means you won't always need a dictionary when you come across words you don't yet know.

Sometimes writers will include the opposite meaning (antonyms) to define a difficult word. The surrounding text will give clues as to what the word *is not*.

### ☀ Practicing the Strategy

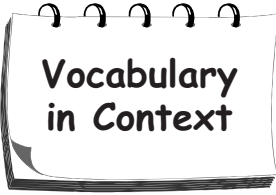
1. Review the context clue strategy before reading the passage.
2. Identify the unknown word you'll try to define from the passage.
3. Read the passage silently looking for any clues that could help define the word.
4. Make predictions about the meaning of the new word. Be prepared to explain how you used context clues to determine the meaning.

The young man was surprised by the rigid routine of the military. Every daily action was scheduled to the minute. Wake-up time was promptly at 6:00 am. Roll call was at 6:30 am, followed by breakfast at 6:45 am. Then duty call was announced at 7:15. The rest of the day's activities were similarly scheduled. His chaotic upbringing in the New York neighborhood (where everyone did what they pleased whenever they pleased) could not have been more different to his new military daily lifestyle.

**Unknown Word:** chaotic

**Phrase:**

**Meaning:**



## Description Clues

### ✚ Learning the Strategy

When you read, finding meanings for words you don't know is kind of like being a detective. Writers put clues to the meaning of words right in the text. If you know how to find context clues, you can figure out what new words mean. This means you won't always need a dictionary when you come across words you don't yet know. Sometimes writers will even include a description to give you clues about what a word means.

### ☀ Practicing the Strategy

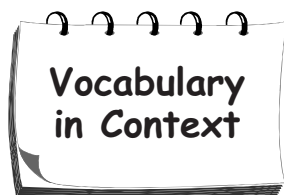
1. Review the context clue strategy before reading the passage.
2. Identify the unknown word you'll try to define from the passage.
3. Read the passage silently looking for any clues that could help define the word.
4. Make predictions about the meaning of the new word. Be prepared to explain how you used context clues to determine the meaning.

We were starving and hopelessly lost tourists in the backstreets of a small Italian village. Unable to use a map and jaded by many years of poor dining in tourist trap towns, we had decided that we were too old to experience a surprise of good fortune in our evening dining experience. Surprises at this age had only yielded repeated disappointments. We were resigned to an expensive and unimpressive meal designed to force us to remember we were unwanted American tourists. Just as we were about to give up we noticed a back alley restaurant peopled only by local Italians. We made our way into the doorway and were ushered in with the greatest of welcomes. The meal was superb and the service deserved many accolades. We were convinced that had this been part of our own designed plan, it would not have delivered the exemplary results we were allowed to experience. Accidentally discovering this fine restaurant in the out-of-the-way alley was the fortunate mistake that led us all to believe in the merits of serendipity once again.

**Unknown Word:** serendipity

**Phrase:**

**Meaning:**



## Definitions or Synonyms

### ✦ Learning the Strategy

When you read, finding meanings for words you don't know is kind of like being a detective. Writers put clues to the meaning of words right in the text. If you know how to find context clues, you can figure out what new words mean. This means you won't always need a dictionary when you come across words you don't yet know.

Writers sometimes give a definition or synonym as a clue to help readers define possible new terms. One clue is that a synonym or definition is about to follow is a comma or a dash. Other clues may be words such as *called*, *or*, *that is*, and *in other words*. This type of clue is found in textbooks.

### ☀ Practicing the Strategy

1. Review the context clue strategy before reading the passage.
2. Identify the unknown word you'll try to define from the passage.
3. Read the passage silently looking for any clues that could help define the word.
4. Make predictions about the meaning of the new word. Be prepared to explain how you used context clues to determine the meaning.

Cockroaches are insects that have been inhabitants of Planet Earth for centuries. Entomologists, or scientists who study insects, report that cockroaches may have been around since dinosaur times. These insects have mutated, in other words, *changed*, to survive many extinction techniques employed by both humans and nature to rid themselves of these pests.

**Unknown Word:** entomologist

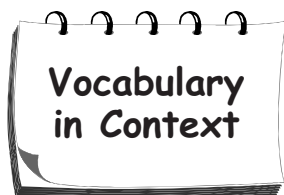
**Phrase:**

**Meaning:**

**Unknown Word:** mutate

**Synonym:**

**Meaning:**



## Words or Phrases that Modify

### Learning the Strategy

When you read, finding meanings for words you don't know is kind of like being a detective. Writers put clues to the meaning of words right in the text. If you know how to find context clues, you can figure out what new words mean. This means you won't always need a dictionary when you come across words you don't yet know.

Modifiers such as adjectives, adverbs, or phrases and clauses often provide clues to the meanings of unknown words.

### Practicing the Strategy

1. Review the context clue strategy before reading the passage.
2. Identify the unknown word you'll try to define from the passage.
3. Read the passage silently looking for any clues that could help define the word.
4. Make predictions about the meaning of the new word. Be prepared to explain how you used context clues to determine the meaning.

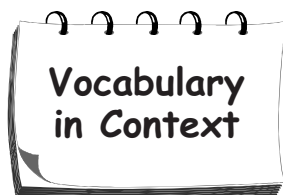
Her extroverted personality explained her outgoing and lively behavior. She enjoyed being with crowds of people and seemed to feed off of their energy. The more people she was around, the louder, friendlier, and more vivacious she became.

**Unknown Word:** extroverted

**Phrase/modifiers:**

**Meaning:**





## Conjunctions Showing Relationships

### ✚ Learning the Strategy

When you read, finding meanings for words you don't know is kind of like being a detective. Writers put clues to the meaning of words right in the text. If you know how to find context clues, you can figure out what new words mean. This means you won't always need a dictionary when you come across words you don't yet know.

Writers give clues that begin with conjunctions showing the relationships between words. Coordinating conjunctions include *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, and *yet*. Subordinating conjunctions are *since*, *because*, *even though*, *if*, *just as*, *when*, *whenever*, *until*, and *although*. These clues allow readers to connect unfamiliar words with familiar words.

### ☀ Practicing the Strategy

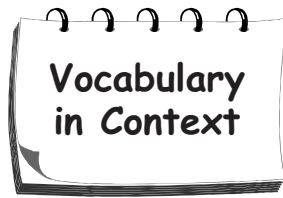
1. Review the context clue strategy before reading the passage.
2. Identify the unknown word you'll try to define from the passage.
3. Read the passage silently looking for any clues that could help define the word.
4. Make predictions about the meaning of the new word. Be prepared to explain how you used context clues to determine the meaning.

Because a person keeps to himself in social situations and would prefer to be home alone, people often consider him to be introverted.

**Unknown Word:** introverted

**Phrase:**

**Meaning:**



## Sample Solutions

### Concrete Examples

Scientists, such as paleontologists, have developed several techniques to study life from the prehistoric ages. These techniques allow them to study fossilized remains of plants, insects, extinct reptiles, and dinosaurs.

**Unknown word:** paleontologist

**Phrase:** Scientists, such as paleontologists ...study life from the prehistoric ages.

**Meaning:** Paleontologists are scientists who study fossilized life forms from the prehistoric ages.

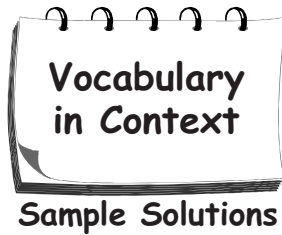
### Contrast Clues

The young man was surprised by the rigid routine of the military. Every daily action was scheduled to the minute. Wake-up time was promptly at 6:00 am. Roll call was at 6:30 am, followed by breakfast at 6:45 am. Then duty call was announced at 7:15. The rest of the day's activities were similarly scheduled. His chaotic upbringing in the New York neighborhood (where everyone did what they pleased whenever they pleased) could not have been more different to his new military daily lifestyle.

**Unknown word:** chaotic

**Phrase:** ...where everyone did what they pleased whenever they pleased could not have been more different to his new military daily lifestyle.

**Meaning:** the opposite of regular, routinely scheduled events. It must mean that things are done without routine and without schedule.



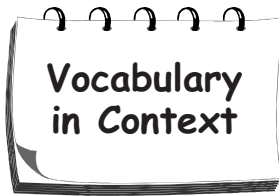
## Description Clues

We were starving and hopelessly lost tourists in the backstreets of a small Italian village. Unable to use a map and jaded by many years of poor dining in tourist trap towns, we had decided that we were too old to experience a surprise of good fortune in our evening dining experience. Surprises at this age had only yielded repeated disappointments. We were resigned to an expensive and unimpressive meal designed to force us to remember we were unwanted American tourists. Just as we were about to give up we noticed a back alley restaurant peopled only by local Italians. We made our way into the doorway and were ushered in with the greatest of welcomes. The meal was superb and the service deserved many accolades. We were convinced that had this been part of our own designed plan, it would not have delivered the exemplary results we were allowed to experience. Accidentally discovering this fine restaurant in the out-of-the-way alley was the fortunate mistake that led us all to believe in the merits of serendipity once again.

**Unknown Word:** serendipity

**Phrase:** accidentally discovering this fine restaurant in the out-of-the-way alley was the fortunate mistake...

**Meaning:** to make a fortunate mistake, to accidentally discover something that is fortunate



## Sample Solutions

### Definitions or Synonyms

Cockroaches are insects that have been inhabitants of Planet Earth for centuries. Entomologists, or scientists who study insects, report that cockroaches may have been around since dinosaur times. These insects have mutated, in other words, *changed*, to survive many extinction techniques employed by both humans and nature to rid themselves of these pests.

**Unknown Word:** entomologist

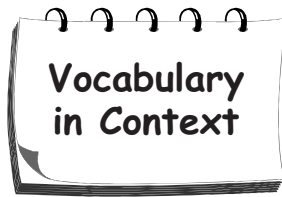
**Phrase:** scientist who studies insects.

**Meaning:** a scientist who studies insects, including cockroaches

**Unknown Word:** mutate

**Synonym:** change

**Meaning:** some type of physical change that insects make to survive environmental or human made extinction devices



## Sample Solutions

### Words or Phrases that Modify

Her extroverted personality explained her outgoing and lively behavior. She enjoyed being with crowds of people and seemed to feed off of their energy. The more people she was around, the louder, friendlier, and more vivacious she became.

**Unknown word:** extroverted

**Phrase/modifiers:** outgoing, lively, enjoyed being with crowds of people, feed off their energy, louder, friendlier, vivacious

**Meaning:** a personality trait of someone who is outgoing, lively, enjoys being with people, and exhibits vivacious behavior.

### Conjunctions Showing Relationships

Because a person keeps to himself in social situations and would prefer to be home alone, people often consider him to be introverted.

**Unknown word:** introverted

**Phrase:** Because a person keeps to himself in social situations and would prefer to be home alone...

**Meaning:** introverted must mean a personality or behavior where a person keeps to himself instead of interacting or socializing with others